

# Editorials & Opinion

## *Not retirement, but fulfillment*

**R**etirement beckoned. After 30 years as a senior executive in the agri-food business, Paul van der Wel was looking forward to life without quarterly earnings reports, shareholders' meetings, office pressures and responsibility for thousands of employees.

He left it to his wife to pick their 23rd — and last — home. Having lived in Europe, the United States and four Canadian provinces, she chose a four-bedroom cottage on Georgian Bay, where she could draw and paint and weave.

But retirement quickly palled for the high-powered businessman.

The pace was too slow. The golf course didn't provide enough stimulation. He felt as if his brain was turning to mush.

It was his daughter, Lina, who urged him to consider a second career in the voluntary sector. She had spent two years working in Malawi for World University Service of Canada.

Proud as van der Wel was of her, he couldn't envisage a retired 61-year-old corporate executive getting involved in the fight against global poverty. He wasn't a crusader, he was a hard-nosed manager.

So his wife and daughter took things into their own hands. When the presidency of Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO) came open, they applied on van der Wel's behalf.

A year later, he is happily ensconced in a modest office at CESO's headquarters in Toronto. He lives in a downtown apartment and commutes to Penetang on weekends. He is using many of his old skills and developing new ones. He has already increased the number of volunteers working in the field by 25 per cent.

"It gives you a marvellous feeling to switch from profit-loss statements to helping people."



**Carol Goar**

CESO, which has been around for 40 years, is undergoing a kind of renaissance. The non-profit agency, which sends retired executives to developing countries and aboriginal communities, is reaching out to Canadians, rather than letting them find out about it by word-of-mouth or happenstance. It is working with other overseas development groups to promote global citizenship.

Voluntary organizations are seeing an upswing of interest from two groups: young people who want to make a difference and retirees who want to give something back.

In a sense, van der Wel combines both trends.

He is following in his daughter's footsteps. It was her sense of global responsibility that drew him into the voluntary sector. It was her work in Malawi that exposed him to the poverty and the potential of developing nations.

But looking back, van der Wel sees other forces driving him in the direction he finally took.

Early in his career, he and his wife were foster parents. There were always extra teenagers living in their Scarborough home. The Children's Aid Society knew it could drop off a youngster at night, if there was no other option.

As he rose through the corporate ranks, changing jobs and homes frequently, it became impossible to have foster children. "But the social awareness was there," he says. "It just took

me 35 years to apply it."

During his tenure as chief executive of McCain Foods in Europe, van der Wel discovered he had talent for working in a multicultural environment.

The company did business in Libya, Angola, Sudan, Mozambique and the Congo. That meant dealing with political upheavals, beetle infestations, logistical headaches and systemic corruption. It meant staying calm when schedules went awry and plans fell through. It meant persevering in difficult circumstances. "But you still do things right and correctly," van der Wel says. "This is not just a business principle, it is a development principle."

As he grew older, he found that this value system was changing. He was becoming more patient, less driven, more attentive to cues from his family.

It all came together last spring, when his wife and daughter gave him the push he needed.

What his story illustrates, van der Wel says, is that voluntary service is not for people with a vague desire to improve the world. Agencies such as CESO are looking for individuals with specific skills and practical knowledge.

Nor is development work for people who want to run the show. CESO does not impose its projects or priorities on host countries. It asks local organizations — businesses, schools, grassroots groups — what they want to achieve. Then it sends in Canadians to help them reach their goals.

As the baby boom generation approaches retirement, CESO's roster of volunteers is likely to grow and its workload is likely to increase. It is a prospect van der Wel relishes.

This isn't how he imagined his retirement. It is immeasurably better.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.